Peer Observation of Teaching: Guidance and Support

Executive Summary
Guidance on Peer Observation of Teaching has been developed in partnership between IAD and Academic Services and approved by Senate Learning and Teaching Committee. The next stage of the process for approving the guidance is to consult with the College Learning and Teaching Committees about their expectations of how it might be used within each College.

How does this align with the University's strategic plans and priorities?
Aligns with the Strategic Goal of Excellence in Education and the Strategic Theme of Outstanding Student Experience.

Action requested
For discussion: two specific questions are asked of the Committee

How will any action agreed be implemented and communicated?
CLTC is asked to provide feedback on a set of guidance already approved by SLTC. Academic Services will join the Committee's discussion, and feedback any comments and suggestions raised in relation to College usage of the guidance.

Resource / Risk / Compliance

1. Resource implications (including staffing)
   None

2. Risk assessment
   N/A – guidance already approved by Senate LTC, associated risk will have been assessed by that Committee

3. Equality and Diversity
   N/A – guidance already approved by Senate LTC, so implications for equality and diversity will have been considered by that Committee

4. Freedom of information
   Open

Key words
Learning, teaching, peer observation, guidance documents

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Guidance to support the use of peer observation of teaching

Background

Peer observation of teaching represents a valuable learning opportunity for staff. To this end, the University is committed to providing staff with opportunities to undertake peer observation of teaching (POT). Further, there is interest from Schools about how best to use POT to enhance practice.

There is a need for clear and accessible guidance on peer observation of teaching. To this end the Institute for Academic Development and Academic Services have developed a set of online resources to be used by staff who are undertaking POT, and these are appended to this paper. The guidance sets out the benefits of peer observation, and provides an outline of how to run a simple scheme. The guidance emphasise two aspects of POT. First, that POT covers a wide range of teaching scenarios beyond the lecture theatre including teaching that takes place in a diverse range of settings such as knowledge exchange events and research seminars, as well as one-to-one teaching and on-line teaching. And secondly, that the benefits of the scheme accrue as much to the person doing the observation, as to the member of staff who is being observed. The guidance includes quotes from staff who have taken part in a peer observation scheme and their sense of the benefits of this.

The guidance would be used by Schools who are encouraging staff to engage in POT, as well as by interested individuals. It has been designed so that it can be used flexibly and for a range of purposes. These include:

- **formative approaches** for example where staff choose to use it to get peer support to investigate a specific aspect of their teaching practice; as part of a formal staff development programme (such as PGCAP or the EdTA); or as something to discuss at annual review or with a line manager or mentor.

- **summative approaches** as part of a formal process in some Schools (for example linked to probation/part of staff induction) or in support of a case for promotion.

The guidance has been developed within the IAD. This process involved consulting with the College Registrars and Schools about the extent of peer observation of teaching and the approaches used, as well as with an expert in the field from the University of Glasgow. The guidance has been subject to comment by a range of peers from across the University and the approach outlined has been used successfully in the PGCAP.

This guidance has now been approved by the University Learning and Teaching Committee. The next stage of the process for approving the guidance is to consult with the College Learning and Teaching Committees about their expectations of how it might be used within each College.
**Relationship to current guidelines**

The University has guidance on peer observation of teaching (POT). This can be found at:

http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Quality/QE/PeerObservationOfTeachingGuidance.pdf

This guidance explains how to approach peer observation of teaching, and is accompanied with a standard University form for recording the fact that POT has taken place.

However, this guidance is fairly old (approved in 2010 by the Senate Learning and Teaching Committee) and has not reviewed since then (it is scheduled for review in 2015-16).

It would be appropriate to replace the existing guidance with new the proposed new on-line resource, which would incorporate relevant elements of the 2010 guidance, but would extend the current guidelines by emphasising the range of situations where teaching takes place, and by providing a set of resources that are flexible enough to accommodate this diversity.

**Questions for LTC**

Does the Committee have comments to make about the guidance for example about how to improve the content and structure, or the usability?

How would the Committee expect the guidance to be used by colleagues? Is there an expectation about that staff should engage in peer observation and, if so, how often?
Appendix One: text for the guidance on peer observation of teaching.

Peer observation of teaching

This is a guide to be used in situations where peer observation of teaching is taking place. It encourages peers to engage with one another in thoughtful reflection on their pedagogic practice. It is based on academic research and feedback from existing peer observation schemes.

What is peer observation of teaching?

Peer observation of teaching is a formative process where peers work together to observe each other’s teaching. This process can be undertaken in groups, in pairs, or in a situation where one person observes another. The observer offers feedback to the colleague who is doing the teaching.

What are the aims of peer observation of teaching?

- To enhance teaching through critical reflection on it
- To enhance the quality of teaching and student learning
- To bring benefits to the person doing the observation as well as to the person doing the teaching

What kinds of teaching can you have observed?

Any kind of teaching can be observed. The crucial thing is that the teacher is facilitating some kind of learning to take place. This teaching could be a lecture, or a tutorial or seminar. It could also be a lab class, or a field trip. Or it could be a one-to-one session with a student, for example in a PhD supervision. And the teaching can take place in any medium. You might want the observation to focus on an online session – how to moderate a discussion board for example, or how you facilitate a session using Collaborate.

What’s important about the process is that it’s based on a situation where teaching is taking place. This makes the scope of peer observation very wide. You could choose to have your teaching observed in a research seminar or even in a public engagement event.

What are the benefits of a peer observation scheme?
There are many benefits to having your teaching observed. We almost always think of these as being mainly for the person doing the teaching but research shows that both parties benefit. Indeed, in many situation the greatest benefits actually flow to the person who is observing. Some of these benefits include:

- Discussion of your teaching
- Sharing of good practice
- Positive valuing of teaching
- Sharing critical reflections
- Challenging assumptions about teaching
- Learning about a range of different approaches to learning and teaching

We can all learn a great deal by watching how other people design and deliver their teaching. Even if you are a teacher with a lot of experience you can still learn from observing your peers.

**How will peer observation of teaching work?**

This is a peer-based scheme which is based on the assumption that everyone involved in teaching has knowledge and expertise to share.

There are three stages involved in the observation process, and there is a form to help with each of these:

1. Before the observation
2. During the observation
3. After the observation

**1. Before the observation**

The first thing you need to do is to choose a peer. Some Schools will undertake the pairing process on your behalf. In others, it is up to you to make this decision and you need to decide what School or discipline that peer is from. It can be enormously beneficial to go outside your comfort zone or School to see how teaching is undertaken differently in other parts of the University. Equally, you may prefer to work with someone from within your own area because of the importance of discipline-specific teaching approaches that you would like feedback on.

The next thing is to meet with your peer to discuss the teaching you would like to have observed. You should fill out the following form and use it to start your discussion. This asks for some basic
information about the teaching session as well as helping both you and your observer to think about what you would like to learn from the observation.

**Pre-observation form**

**To be filled in by the person being observed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date, time and venue of session to be observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic for the session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context eg have you met the students before, what format will the teaching take, where does this session fit with the rest of the course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are you aiming to do in the session?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything specific you would like feedback on?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will you introduce the observer to the students?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **During the observation**

The next stage is to undertake the observation itself. There are a number of practical things for both peers to consider:

- How should you introduce your observer?
You should proceed as normally as possible
The emphasis should be on the teaching (and not on the content)
The observer should take notes on the teaching

Again, there is a form to fill in to help with these processes. This time the form should be filled in by the person doing the observation.

**Observation form (to be filled in by the person doing the observing)**

What went well with the session (eg structure, activities, clarity, pace, organisation, interaction, body language, visual aids, enthusiasm)?

Can you identify areas for reflection and possible improvement (as above)?

Do you have any comments on specific areas of focus identified prior to observation?

What have you learnt that you can use in your own teaching?

3. **After the observation**

The final stage is to meet to discuss what you have learnt from the process – this could take place immediately after the observation. During this time you should use the observation form to offer feedback on how teaching went, as well as to think about what you have learnt from the process of undertaking the observation. It’s important to keep this discussion positive and constructive and to think about what you have learnt from the process, whether as an observer or through the process of being observed.
Peer observation of teaching is a developmental activity. The final form to fill in will help you to reflect on how you might develop your teaching. This should be filled in by the person who was doing the teaching.

Post observation form (to be filled in by the person being observed)

Were there any differences/similarities between your views and those of your observer?

Can you identify any areas of good practice from the teaching session?

What areas of development can you identify from the feedback and how do you intend to address these?

What next? Using the results of peer observation of teaching

We have deliberately designed this guidance so that it can be used flexibly and for a range of purposes. These include:

- **Formative approaches** for example you choosing to use it yourself to get peer support to investigate a specific aspect of your teaching practice; as part of a formal staff development programme (such as PGCAP or the EdTA); or as something to discuss at annual review or with a line manager or mentor.

- **Summative basis** as part of a formal process in some Schools (for example linked to probation/part of staff induction) or in support of a case for promotion.
Quotes from staff about the benefits of peer observation

‘having my teaching observed gave me a great sense of confidence in what I was doing in the classroom’

‘I’m constantly re-using tips, tricks, and methods I’ve observed other people using in my own teaching’

‘Watching other people teach allows me to become a student once again and reflect on my own teaching from the ‘other side’.

‘I find it immensely valuable to be able to watch and observe how other people go about their teaching. It’s a privilege to be invited’.

‘now that I am more experienced with teaching I feel that the most meaningful benefit of peer observation comes from reflection on why and how we can achieve our teaching aims. The opportunities for reflection are arguably greater for the observer since the practice they observe is not bound up in their own habit or entrenched views, and is likely to suggest new ideas or perspectives that they can bring to their own practice’.

‘In my experience, POT is like holding up a mirror so that a critical friend can provide you with constructive feedback on your teaching. At this point, you can either look away or engage with the process by reflecting on their observations and undertaking some critical self-evaluation with a view to improving the quality and effectiveness of your teaching.’

Further reading

For how peer observation can bring about discussion of teaching see:

On how peer observation can contribute to the enhancing the value of teaching see:

On how the opportunities for shared critical reflection within peer observation can lead to the
challenging of assumptions about teaching see:

On how the benefits of peer observation accrue to the person doing the observing: